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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BISHKEK 000427

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SUBJECT: DAS FEIGENBAUM MEETS WITH CIVIL SOCIETY AND
PARLIAMENT, AS PROTEST CONTINUES IN BISHKEK

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Classified By: Amb. Marie L. Yovanovitch, Reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: SCA DAS Evan Feigenbaum arrived April 15 to an unsettled political situation in Kyrgyzstan. United Front leader Felix Kulov has vowed publicly to press on with street demonstrations until President Bakiyev resigns, even though the demonstrations have failed to gain momentum. In meetings on April 16, DAS Feigenbaum heard from a range of civil society activists, intelligentsia, and parliamentary leaders.

Most expressed cynicism about political developments, criticizing both the president and the opposition as being more concerned with power than reform. Parliament Speaker Sultanov said that a constitutional compromise was likely, but others doubted a text would get through parliament. Analyst Valentin Bogatyrev said that several opposition leaders were ready to break with Kulov, and Bakiyev would use any negotiations to split the opposition. Bogatyrev said that Bakiyev will block the constitutional amendments, and hoped to put off the next clash with the opposition until the fall. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) In separate meetings on April 16, SCA DAS Evan Feigenbaum saw Speaker Marat Sultanov and MP Omurbek Tekebayev at the parliament. He met with Kyrgyz intelligentsia, including former Foreign Minister Muratbek Imanaliyev, analyst Valentin Bogatyrev, former parliamentarian Zainidin Kurmanov, businessman Emil Umetaliyev, and foundation head Ishenbay Abdurazakov. He also met with civil society representatives Raya Kadyrova (Foundation for Tolerance International), Erkina Ubysheva (Association of Civil Society Support Centers), Gulnara Iskakova (law professor at AUCA), Nurlan Sadikov (Institute of Constitutional Policy), and Azamat Kerimbayev (ABA/CEELI).

He met with IMF Res Rep James McHugh, World Bank Country Director Roger Robinson, ADB Rep Ashraf Malik, and Japanese Charge Kasai Tatsuhiko to discuss economic and assistance issues. DAS Feigenbaum made remarks to the American Chamber of Commerce. DAS Feigenbaum's meeting with FM Karabayev will be reported septel.

SULTANOV: COMPROMISE POSSIBLE

13. (C) Speaker of Parliament Marat Sultanov told DAS Feigenbaum that negotiations between the government, opposition, and parliament were possible. He said that President Bakiyev had agreed to incorporate the opposition's proposals into a draft constitution prepared by PM Atambayev's working group, and that all sides had agreed to review the draft. Sultanov defended the December 2006 version of the constitution, arguing it did not constitute a "step back" from the November 2006 version, which had been adopted in the wake of demonstrations. Sultanov went point by point through the December version to show that it did not necessarily bolster the president's authority. He also pulled out the original copy of the text to show Feigenbaum the signatures of those -- including many in the opposition -- who had agreed to each of the amendments. Sultanov said that the problem with the December constitution was its lack of transitional provisions, but that could be resolved through negotiations. Sultanov said that while both the president and the opposition were quick to take offense, he was certain that the current political crisis would be settled peacefully and within the framework of the law.

TEKEBAYEV: SKEPTICAL ABOUT EARLY COMPROMISE

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14. (C) Opposition MP Omurbek Tekebayev was skeptical that Bakiyev could end the current political stand-off, because he had consistently blocked all previous attempts at reform. Tekebayev said that Bakiyev only agreed to reforms under pressure, and was quick to rescind his concessions once he felt he had the upper hand. Tekebayev said Bakiyev had used personal attacks and the threat of dissolution to force parliament to accept the December 2006 constitution which restored much of the presidential authority lost in the November version. Tekebayev said that harassment from authorities continued, including against the staff of his television station in Jalalabad and against members of his Ata Meken political party.

15. (C) Tekebayev discounted Bakiyev's latest moves toward the opposition, noting that constitutional reforms would go nowhere because the Constitutional Court lacked a quorum due to the president's unwillingness to nominate more judges for parliamentary approval. He also claimed that KTR would never be turned into a public broadcaster because the pro-Bakiyev majority in parliament would vote down the creation of an advisory council. The only way to reverse this trend, said Tekebayev, would be for Bakiyev to accept a parliamentary form of government and agree to step down. While hoping for a compromise, Tekebayev said his Ata Meken party could not take part in negotiations due to "radical" elements within the party. (NOTE: With their red t-shirts, hats, and banners, Ata Meken party members have been a visible presence at the demonstration. END NOTE.) Instead, "centrist" politicians -- like MPs Sariyev and Baibolov -- were in a better position to negotiate. Tekebayev predicted that by the end of the week everything would be clearer, and that "somebody" would make a mistake.

INTELLIGENTSIA: DEEPLY CYNICAL

16. (C) Over the course of a relaxed dinner meeting, several members of the Kyrgyz intelligentsia were deeply cynical

about the current political environment. They found fault in all the current political players, comparing them to "mini-khans" lacking nationalistic ideals or the vision necessary to lead the country. All were concerned that Kulov had backed himself into a corner with inflexible demands, and he might resort to take radical measures to save face. The analysts noted that Bakiyev had demonstrated a readiness to talk with the opposition, effectively undercutting the oppositions' rhetoric. They felt that PM Atambayev, just like Kulov, had come to power without a planned course of action or direction. They attributed much of the current political instability to the lack of a developed political culture in the country, with one analyst saying that political movements were still largely based on clans or geographical ties, rather than ideas.

17. (C) Several in the group were concerned about the influence of Russian media in Kyrgyzstan, and the impact of the steady anti-American rhetoric on Kyrgyz youth. The absence of an English-speaking, politically active generation made it difficult for American media to counter the Russians.

Although the group believed that the Manas Air Base was still necessary, recent negative incidents such as the shooting and plane accident had contributed to the anti-American views already developed by the Russian media. The analysts said that more transparency about base activities, contracts awarded to Kyrgyz companies, rent agreements, and overall cash payments to the Kyrgyz government would help counteract the constant flow of "black

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PR" from Russia. The group believed that balanced influence by all of the powers, such as the U.S., China, Russia, and Europe, was important for stability in Kyrgyzstan.

BAKIYEV'S CONCESSIONS MERELY A TACTIC?

18. (C) Following the dinner, DAS Feigenbaum met with Bogatyrev, who continues to advise the president. Bogatyrev said that there had been a split in the opposition, prompted by the failure of the street demonstration to gain traction. The group around Kulov still refused to talk to Bakiyev, while the more moderate opposition group -- including MPs Baibolov, Sariyev, and Babanov -- understood that they had to talk to the president. The more moderate group also felt that they could work with the draft constitution produced by Atambayev's working group.

19. (C) Bogatyrev said that Bakiyev saw talks with the opposition as merely a tactic, and his immediate goal was not to adopt the draft constitution, but to use the parliament to delay the process. Bogatyrev claimed that pro-Bakiyev MPs had already received instructions to make sure the draft constitution was not adopted. Bakiyev would continue talks with the opposition, and then blame the parliament for inaction. According to Bogatyrev, Bakiyev's goal was to delay any political confrontation until the fall, when he would be in a stronger position to influence (early) parliamentary elections. Some in the opposition -- such as Beknazarov and Otunbayeva -- understand this tactic and are, therefore, pushing for a constitutional referendum. Others in the opposition, such as Tekebayev, fear that Bakiyev would use the promise of a constitutional referendum to pull a "bait and switch" -- that is, agreeing to a referendum first, and then putting forward his draft at the last minute. (NOTE: Former President Akayev did this in a 2003 constitutional referendum. END NOTE.) He said that more radical parliamentarians like Tekebayev were ready to call for dissolution of the parliament.

CIVIL SOCIETY: DOUBTS ABOUT KULOV . . .

10. (C) Several civil society representatives (some of whom

have been active in opposition political movements) told DAS Feigenbaum that they found it difficult to believe Kulov's transition from government to opposition leader. They saw Kulov as "good product of the Soviet system," who says many of the right things but is not a reformer. The group lamented that the opposition, which had been more united in November, was now split between Kulov's more radical United Front, whose goal was Bakiyev's resignation, and the For Reforms movement, which was mainly interested in constitutional reform. They regretted that many of the opposition politicians were far more interested in the struggle for power than in reforms.

. . . AND CONCERN ABOUT THE CONSTITUTION

¶11. (C) The civil society leaders agreed that the draft constitution prepared by Prime Minister Atambayev's working group was a vast improvement over the current "December" constitution (NOTE: One of the group, Nurlan Sadikov, served on the PM's constitutional working group; another, Gulnara Iskakova, was the primary drafter of the Baibolov-proposed constitution. END NOTE.) They noted that the most important

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improvement was in the area of checks and balances, with a much stronger parliament. Some in the group, however, doubted that this draft constitution would be passed by the parliament, due to opposition from pro-Bakiyev deputies. Several in the group were concerned that civil society was not as effective as it had been in the past, and that the U.S. should do more to support civil society groups, political party development, and the parliament.

SLOW PROGRESS ON ECONOMIC, BUSINESS REFORMS

¶12. (C) IFI representatives presented a mixed review of the state of the Kyrgyz economy and progress toward economic reforms. World Bank rep Robinson said that because of the lack of progress on reforms, Kyrgyzstan's May Consultative Group meeting had been downgraded to a nearly meaningless "Development Forum." The reps attributed the reported rapid growth in the Kyrgyz economy mostly to remittances from the large portion of the workforce living abroad. While the passing of the state budget was a positive step, the budget had undergone a series of changes, none of which had yet been made public -- and were not approved by the IFIs. The reps noted that Kyrgyzstan had great trade potential in hydro-electricity production, but the Kyrgyz currently charged some of the lowest tariffs in the world and had "no appetite for energy sector reforms." In informal remarks to the American Chamber of Commerce, Feigenbaum noted that the U.S. was working along with the IFIs to help develop more lucrative markets in South Asia for Kyrgyzstan's hydro potential, and that the USG was working with groups like AmCham to push for reforms that would benefit all businesses.

Several AmCham members complained to DAS Feigenbaum about problems in the business environment due to corruption and lack of rule of law.

COMMENT

¶13. (C) Cynicism about the current political situation is widespread, with many believing that the political leadership is interested only in power, not reform or governance. While Speaker Sultanov was optimistic that a constitutional compromise would go forward, there are many potential hurdles -- not the least of which is the possibility that the pro-Bakiyev MPs will block consideration of the draft in parliament.

¶14. (U) This cable has been cleared by DAS Feigenbaum.
YOVANOVITCH